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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 005336

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/20/2013

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: JORDANIAN ISLAMISTS USE PARLIAMENTARY PLATFORM TO
AIR GRIEVANCES, SLAM U.S. POLICY

Classified By: Charge David Hale for Reasons 1.5 (b)(d)

Summary

1. (C) The Islamic Action Front (IAF), political arm of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, bounded onto the political scene in Jordan this month after boycotting the political process since 1997. Relishing its newfound legitimate voice in the Jordanian Parliament, the IAF aired longstanding grievances with the government and strongly condemned U.S. policy vis-a-vis Iraq and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Beyond the parliamentary forum, IAF and MB officials issued statements denouncing U.S. regional policy, opinions that resonate strongly with the Jordanian population at large. While few MPs quibbled with the Islamists take on U.S. Middle East policy, the IAF's critique of government policies drew fire from many MPs, some charging that such rhetoric provoked sedition. The IAF will use its new voice in the Parliament to press the government on its grievances and grandstand on those issues which resonate most with Jordanians. However, the group's rhetoric will do little to sway ordinary Jordanians to their ranks without a more substantial political platform and a demonstrated willingness to work with the new government and achieve concrete results. End Summary.

IAF's Bold Criticism of Government Draws Rebuke

2. (U) Taking advantage of its newfound public voice in the Parliament, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), offered bold statements this month harshly criticizing the Jordanian government and U.S. policy vis-a-vis Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Newly elected IAF Members of Parliament (MPs) condemned what they view as the government's corruption and nepotism, and charged that Abul Ragheb's Cabinet was not operating in accordance with Islamic Sharia. IAF MP Ali Utoum (Irbid, 1st District) slammed the Jordan First motto, saying it promoted "egotism, arrogance, and fanaticism."

3. (U) IAF Deputy Mohammed Abu Fares (Amman, 5th District) accused the prime minister of allowing his "gladiators," referring to the security forces, to enter a mosque with dogs and attack people gathered in Mahatta neighborhood who were showing solidarity with the Palestinians. He claimed the incident left an IAF leader wounded. Abu Fares added that a government "that normalizes with Israel and allows American troops to sully its soil does not deserve my confidence."

4. (U) The IAF criticism surprised observers because the Islamic bloc's initial joint statement delivered by Assam Hneidi (Amman, 1st District) was relatively moderate in tone as he pledged to work with the government in the interest of national unity. "We want to stress that we agree with the government on every issue that serves national interests," he said, promising that every positive step from the government would be reciprocated.

5. (U) IAF Deputy Nidal Abbadi (Amman, 6th District) said his vote depended on the fulfillment of two conditions: the implementation of Islamic Sharia and the annulment of Jordan's peace treaty with Israel. Abbadi also referred to Ahmed Daqamseh, the jailed soldier that opened fire on Israeli schoolchildren in Jordan, presenting the prime minister a handmade key chain bearing the word "Mabruk," or "Congratulations," as a gesture of good will in hope of a pardon for Daqamseh.

6. (C) The IAF MPs' speeches drew sharp rebukes from other lawmakers, who suggested such comments verged on sedition. "The speeches were inflammatory and skeptical of even the legitimacy of national unity, which we take pride in, prodding dissent and undermining the solidarity and security the Kingdom enjoys," said MP Ghaleb Zu'bi (Balqa, 1st District). "Issuing a religious edict that our national unity is not Islamic and inciting disintegration ... projects personal interests." Zu'bi's comments provoked an outburst from Utoum, who shouted that deputies had the right to say whatever they wanted at the podium. Former Amman mayor and health minister Mamdouh Abbadi (Amman, 3rd District) jumped

into the fray, warning Utoum to "Stay silent." Christian MP Odeh Qawwas (Amman, 3rd District) told PolCouns that he is already fed up with "the extremists" in the IAF in Parliament and hopes the IAF leadership would corral "the four hard core extremists" among IAF MPs.

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Islamists, Non-Islamists Alike Slam U.S. Policy
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17. (U) Whereas the MPs were of many minds with regard to domestic issues, there was wide consensus in one area during the parliamentary session: rejection of U.S. policies vis-a-vis Iraq and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. All IAF MPs strongly denounced the U.S. occupation of Iraq and rejected the Middle East roadmap, saying the plan only served to boost Israel's security at the expense of the Palestinian people's aspirations.

18. (U) Public comments from MB officials complemented the IAF's rhetoric inside Parliament. For example, in the aftermath of the bombing of the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad, a Muslim Brotherhood statement on August 10 squarely placed the blame for the attack on the "unjust" U.S. occupation, charging that the situation was encouraging chaos and the killing of innocent people. In an interview with al-Ra'i newspaper on August 7, MB Deputy Supervisor General Hammam Said called on the Iraqi Islamists to leave the Provisional Governing Council.

19. (U) The IAF on August 17 issued a statement that was carried by al-Jazira satellite television urging the government to reject U.S. "pressure" to send forces to Iraq or to recognize the Iraqi Governing Council. It urged Arab and Islamic governments to follow suit and instead "support the Iraqi resistance by all means." (Subsequently, PM Abul Ragheb said Jordan would not join a peacekeeping force in Iraq until there is an elected government there.) Meanwhile, the group welcomed official government statements stressing Iraq's unity and the right of the Iraqi people to determine their own future, according to local press.

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Preview Glimpse into IAF's Domestic Agenda
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10. (U) The IAF's comments and actions since the June election have provided a small window into its domestic agenda. Complementing its call for the implementation of Islamic Sharia law during the parliamentary session, the IAF continues to lobby strongly for its version of public morality. On August 3, IAF deputies joined tribesmen and independents in rejecting temporary laws that advanced women's rights in Jordan. The laws gave women the right to divorce and raised the legal age of marriage for both sexes to 18. Many observers were baffled that two women MPs, including IAF MP Hayat Mseimi (Zarga), voted against these changes. They justified their position saying that such laws only facilitated divorce and harmed the family. Meanwhile, IAF MP Musa Wahsh (Amman, 2nd District) denounced the 200 plus night clubs in Amman and other "immoral" aspects of life in the Kingdom as detrimental to the fabric of Jordanian society.

11. (U) The IAF's campaign rhetoric and parliamentary speeches suggest that the group prides itself on advocating the cause of the economically deprived. Favoritism and government nepotism are attacked as both morally wrong and obstacles to the emergence of a more egalitarian society. The IAF promotes the consolidation of national unity through greater equality among all citizens, particularly in the job market, which it says should be free of consideration of an individual's personal background or relationships. The IAF boycotted the municipal elections on July 26 (except for in greater Amman) to protest Municipal Law No. 70, which allows the government to appoint up to half of all municipal councils and all mayors, with the remainder subject to public election.

Comment

12. (C) Now that it has a legitimate public forum in the Parliament, we expect the IAF to use every opportunity to condemn U.S. policy, particularly regarding Iraq and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Such rhetoric resonates with most Jordanians, even those outside the IAF's main support base. Given the strong rebuke the IAF faced in Parliament, it will be interesting to see if it will temper future public criticism of Abul Ragheb's government, at least in the near term, to show that it is willing to work within the system to encourage positive change for ordinary and poorer Jordanians, the core of its main constituency.

